

made in the earth. These were tightly packed with shed skins. The holes went straight down, until they came to a main root of the jam tree. Here the caterpillars appeared to have hollowed out a cavity to go underneath the root.

When cut through the root near the tree was quite healthy and without injury. The same applied about 12 inches further along the root, in the middle portion, where the root was badly damaged, the centre having been eaten out as a tunnel about 6 inches long (perhaps by wood borers, which are numerous in this district).

The caterpillars had lived in the cavity in the root, cast skins and hairs from their bodies adhered to the sides of the tunnel. They had gone underground about 10 inches before coming to the root. Hollow silken "air-pipes" were found there also.

MIMICRY IN THE BROWN THORNBILL

By Mrs. RICA ERICKSON, "Fairlea," Bolgart

The Brown Thornbills (*Acanthiza pusilla*) on "Fairlea" are attracted by any new sounds in their area and will copy some of them soon after hearing them. In general the mimicry seems to be easily achieved and not merely recognisable but deceptive. When something difficult is attempted, such as long phrases from the song of the Western Shrike-Thrush (*Colluricincla rufiventris*) or the challenge song of the Rufous Whistler (*Pachycephala rufiventris*) the result is awkward to begin with, although proficiency is achieved with assiduous practice.

A pair of Brown Thornbills in the creek timber liked the company of Rufous Whistlers and became very proficient in copying their calls. I found it necessary to check up on the origin of whistler notes before accepting the evidence of my ears. They not only led me astray with their mimicry of young whistlers just learning to sing "sweet swt-swt-swt," but later copied the plaintive notes of an unmated female. One also learned to imitate the long territory challenge so well that I was entirely deceived, although it became evident that the whistler was not. The performance is worthy of a detailed report.

I could not understand why the usually aggressive Rufous Whistler tolerated the presence of this intruder. The whistler preened himself unconcernedly while he replied to challenges issued from the heart of his territory. A search revealed a Brown Thornbill which was mimicking every phrase after it was sung. The whistler seemed to be conscious of teaching his song and would elaborate it a little each time and then would listen as if to judge whether the copy was good. Both birds invited replies and for many minutes there was a constant flow of song. Except for the slower opening note the Brown Thornbill's song was indistinguishable from the Rufous Whistler's. A phonetic rendering of the phrase is attempted here: "Soo-ec-swt-sue-swt-swt-swt-chrry-chrry-chrry-swt-sue-joeey."

On another occasion it appeared that the challenging songs of two rival whistlers had attracted two more whistlers which approached with answering "sweet" calls. These notes were traced to two Brown Thornbills which on seeing me promptly dispelled the illusion by singing a most extravagant chorus of "sweet sweets."

Another Brown Thornbill which frequented the low scrub in the wandoo timber was more accomplished in a different way. This bird was first noticed at dawn one June morning. It was in a small dead jam tree and perched on twigs within my reach. As it hopped from twig to twig it sang a new song for each new perch. The following list is an attempt at putting them on paper:—

(1) "Swce hoo hoo—chee chee"—a combination of a few notes of the Black-throated Butcher-bird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*) and a Grey Fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*). It was notable that this butcher-bird was not heard in that timber until some days later. It was also interesting to notice that the Grey Fantail's chatter was omitted from the mimicry about the time the Grey Fantails left us.

(2) The whiperack call of the Western Shrike-Thrush which also visited our timber a few days later.

(3) The thin "fiddler" notes of the Western Warbler (*Gerygone fusca*).

(4) The "tick-tick-tick-tick" of the Red-eapped Robin (*Petrocca goodenovii*), ending with "swt .soo" of the Rufous Whistler.

After having identified all these very easily the song of "sce hee-so-ho-lgl lgl" puzzled me. Perhaps this was the Brown Thornbill's own song. Later in the year, about nesting time, it composed songs from phrases of different birds, generally three of them to a song. This composition was sung continuously in a most undecceptive manner, although the mimicry of the individual birds was perfect. I listened to it at midday on several successive days and each day a different song was sung, each reflecting the dominant new notes to be heard in the bush around.

1st day: "Caa caa caa-chee chee chee" and the carol of the Grey Butcher-bird (*Cracticus torquatus*). The first two phrases copied a baby Magpie (*Gymnorhina dorsalis*) and the Grey Fantail.

2nd day: "Mid week-bequick" chee ehce ehce-lgl lgl." A combination of calls of the Red-tipped Diamond-bird (*Pardalotus substriatus*), Grey Fantail and possibly its own notes.

3rd day: A Wcebill's (*Smicrornis brevirostris*) "chatter" notes, three rich notes of the Black-throated Butcher-bird and the "chee chee chee" of the Grey Fantail.

4th day: A long trilling note ending with "lgl" which was a copy of the Cicadas which had begun "shrilling."

A few weeks later I heard the versatile bird utter the "sstststst" notes of the Yellow-tailed Thornbill (*Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*), the "drrrrr" of the Rainbow-bird (*Merops ornatus*) and the "pcep pcep" of a young Twentycight Parrot (*Barnardius zonarius*).

Another example of mimicry of a noise (not a bird's call) was a song of the Brown Thornbill's by the creek which began birdlike with "swt-twitty-tee-twt-chee" but always ended with a frog's croak.

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

Can a Magpie Count?—I have not personally witnessed the incident about to be related but several neighbours have seen it on a neighbouring block. Two wood-fellers pitched their tents near where a Western Magpie had her nest and grew quite friendly with the birds, giving them all the scraps left over at meal times. Later on the young ones came out in the nest and on the old bird being fed with a certain number of pieces of bacon she would eat all of them until there were three left. These she carried to the young ones in the nest. The men varied the number of pieces and the last three pieces were always carried to the three young in the nest.

—R. J. MORRISON, West Pingelly.

Wing-span of Wedge-tailed Eagle.—In the *Handbook of the Birds of Western Australia*, 1948, Serventy and Whittell give the average wing-span of the Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*) as between 6 ft. 3 in. and 7 ft. 3 in., stating that the record is held by a Victorian bird with a wing-span of 10 ft. As authentic records of this nature appear to be few it may be of interest to report that some years ago on the Chapman River near its confluence with the Blackwood River, I measured a large eagle with the wing-span of 8 ft. 3 in. This measurement was made with a steel tape between the furthestmost points of the extended wings. This is the largest I have actually measured but unfortunately the sex was not determined.

—D. H. PERRY, Forests Department, Perth.

A Leg-less Silver Gull.—On December 28, 1949 I was fishing at Safety Bay. In the afternoon, when out near Bird Island, there was quite a flock of Silver Gulls (*Larus novae-hollandiae*) around the boat. They gradually settled down on the water except for one bird which kept on circling. This drew my attention to it and when it came near the boat I was astonished to find that it had *no legs*. One-legged Silver Gulls are no rarity but this is the first time that I have seen or heard of a leg-less Gull. Its wings were somewhat frayed at the "wrist" or carpal bend as if it had been pushing itself along with its wings. Strangely enough, despite its condition, it seemed healthy enough.

I am quite certain of its leg-less state, as it flew only a few feet above my head and there was no sign of either leg.

—DON REID, Wembley.